

# **The Food Safety and Inspection Service's After-Action-Report (AAR) for the Functional Human Pandemic Exercise Exercise/Training Held On September 23, 2009**

## **Background**

On September 23, 2009, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Office of Data Integration and Food Protection's (ODIFP) Emergency Response Staff (ERS) and Food Defense Assessment Staff (FDAS) conducted a functional exercise of the FSIS Employee Tracking System. This exercise/training session was conducted as part of FSIS' annual test of its human pandemic operation's plan.

The exercise began at 7:45 am, with the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) Senior Executive Duty Officer (SEDO) being notified through the Department that a spike in 2009 Novel H1N1 infections in Chicago, Illinois, Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. was beginning to impact USDA Operations. In addition, USDA Agencies and Offices with personnel near the affected regions were asked to begin submitting daily reports on employee absenteeism.

The SEDO then notified the EMC recorder to create an Incident Report (IR) and activate the EMC. The EMC convened in Room 1160-S at 9:15 am. At the EMC meeting the SEDO explained why FSIS' Employee Tracking System needed to be initiated, outlined the specific information the Department was looking for and when that information had to be submitted. Each program area representative then went back to their office to gather and report the absenteeism information to the IR by 1:00 pm. A second EMC meeting was held at 1:45 pm to discuss the reported information. Afterwards a "Hot Wash" of what worked well and what was learned during the exercise/training session was conducted.

## **Objectives**

FSIS' objectives for the exercise were as follows:

- Demonstrate that every program area with personnel in a geographic region affected by human pandemic influenza in the exercise generate information necessary for reporting on employee status.
- Provide an opportunity for agency personnel to perform their required procedures for collecting and properly reporting absenteeism data up the chain of command in the event of an actual crisis.
- Ensure that FSIS' Incident Management System (FIMS) and other IT capabilities were able to meet FSIS' needs during implementation of the Employee Tracking System.

## **Observations**

The following observations are based on comments provided by the exercise participants. This includes ODIFP personnel and facilitators. The observations have been organized by major phases of the exercise and are summarized below.

### **Notification and EMC Activation**

- The information provided by the USDA 2009 H1N1 Multi Agency Coordination Group (MAC) group was properly communicated to the SEDO and then to the recorder, as was the request for the EMC to be activated.
- FSIS' Incident Management System was able to properly create an IR, and to activate the EMC.
- All of the program areas were able to convene in room 1160-S or connect using the EMC phone bridge.

### **EMC Briefing**

- The facilitator created a non threatening environment where participants felt comfortable to ask questions. Participants were also made aware of what to expect during the exercise and it was clear to everyone that actual information would need to be collected and reported.
- The facilitator stressed the importance of briefing replacement EMC representatives when transitioning during a pandemic event.
- The SEDO explained the basis for the EMC action – to respond to the USDA Multi-Agency (MAC) group's request for a report on absenteeism from member agencies.
- The SEDO explained the information that will need to be collected, the process that would be used to collect information, and how the information should be reported. .
- To clarify what exactly was meant by “# of employees that could not be reached,” the facilitator explained that it referred only to employees not on any official leave status but could not be contacted.

### **Operations**

- Program areas were able to contact their employees within the three hours allotted during the exercise. Less than 1 percent of the employees located within the affected region were unable to be accounted for by FSIS.

- Some program areas had trouble breaking out the absenteeism information by state. It appeared they forgot to break down the information they were receiving, and not that they were unable to break the information down by State.
- There was some confusion about what was meant by call down procedures. The facilitator and recorder were able to explain the exact procedures were up to the program area, and they could use their COOP call down lists if that was useful to them.
- One program area altered the excel spreadsheet that was provided to them. This would cause a minor issue when creating the situation report.
- There was a question about how someone on their scheduled day off (SDO) should be counted. It was explained that employees on their SDO should be counted as being “absent” for the purpose of the exercise.
- A few program areas did not attempt to reach their employees by phone and instead used e-mail to gather information. It was therefore emphasized that it was important to make phone contact with any employee not in an official leave status to verify “at work” status.
- It became apparent that the Office of Catfish Inspection Programs (OCIP) would have an issue in reporting its information because FIMS currently does not have a listing for OCIP. A workaround was quickly developed where OCIP would send the data to the Recorder on duty. The Recorder would then post it to the IR.
- The collated absenteeism data can be found attached as an Appendix to this After Action Report.

### **Preparation of the Situation Report**

- ERS was able to prepare a situation report on FSIS’ Employee Absenteeism in less than 30 minutes once all of the information was submitted by the program areas.
- ERS Staff agreed that the Excel spreadsheet that program areas entered their information into was very helpful in speeding up the process of preparing the situation report.
- ERS staff had no questions or concerns regarding the Department’s draft situation report template.
- FIMS was able to handle all of the program areas accessing the IR and attaching excel spreadsheets.

### **Briefing the EMC on the status of employee absenteeism**

- The EMC was able to reconvene in a timely manner to discuss the employee absenteeism information collected for the entire Agency.
- The EMC understood the collected information presented to them and what it meant for the Agency. They also understood how this information would be used to respond to increased absenteeism that was affecting FSIS' ability to carry out its mission essential functions.

### **General Thoughts Regarding the 2009 Human Pandemic Exercise/Training Session**

- Participants agreed that having to perform the call down was extremely beneficial and they were better prepared to carry out daily reporting when it becomes necessary.
- Participants asked that ODIFP provide better definitions of employee status in the spreadsheet that program areas were using to collect the data.
- It was agreed program areas need to become more familiar with the Agency's Human Pandemic Operations plan and their specific program areas implementation plan to improve reporting capabilities.
- All of the participants felt the facilitators were helpful and their questions were quickly answered.
- Some participants had concerns about the ability of the agency to carry out this reporting once more people in the chain of command started to become ill and were absent. It was recommended that program areas work to strengthen the connections between employees and supervisors so they know who to contact if their immediate supervisor is out sick, and/or unavailable. It was pointed out that in a pandemic the next highest person on the chain of command is responsible for collecting absenteeism data.
- Participants agreed that program areas need guidance regarding what personal contact information supervisors can require from their direct reports.
- It was agreed the process of tracking employees and reporting information could be expedited after the first complete day of tracking by only reporting changes to the numbers.

### **Outcomes**

FSIS was able to meet or exceed all of the objectives for this exercise. There were several minor glitches that would arise during actually daily reporting, but participants were able to quickly identify the issue and implement contingency planning. The successful completion of the tracking exercise demonstrates they work.

The exercise did highlight several issues and topics needing to be addressed or clarified by FSIS to improve and help ensure the Agency's ability to successfully track its employees during a human pandemic. Recommendations addressing these issues can be found in the next section of this AAR.

## **Recommendations**

ODIFP has listed the following actions and next steps that it believes should be taken in response to the lessons learned from the functional exercise of the FSIS Employee Tracking System along with expected completion dates for these actions and next steps.

- ERS will develop a set list of talking points any SEDO could use when explaining how FSIS' Employee Tracking System should be implemented during an emergency. (October 16, 2009)
- ERS will provide better definitions and directions within the Excel Spread sheet used to collect data on employee absences during a human pandemic. (October 16, 2009)
- ERS will continue to work with OCIO and its contractors to add OCIP to FIMS. (Ongoing)
- ERS will continue to make sure staff members are available to meet with program areas to discuss their human pandemic implementation plans and their preparations to track their employees during a Human Pandemic. (Currently Available)
- ERS will make OM aware of the need for guidance regarding what personal contact information supervisors can require from their direct reports. (September 30, 2009)
- ERS will examine the options available to the Agency and attempt to identify possible methods of ensuring that FSIS' Reporting System continues to work if there is a high number of absenteeism among managers and supervisors. (Ongoing)

## APENDIX A- HUMAN PANDEMIC ABSENTEE COUNTS

### Human Pandemic Absentee Counts September 23, 2009

Program Area	District of Columbia	Florida	Georgia	Illinois	Indiana	Maryland	Ohio	Overall
OA	11							
	1							
OCIP	13							
	2							
ODIFP	33		1					
	3							
OFO	28	102	598	185	131		126	
	3	3	52	12	15		15	
	0	0	11	1	0		0	
OIA	48	5	1	2		2		
	4							
OM	355							
	33							
	1							

OOEET	26		2			18		
	2					2		
OPACE	72							
	1							
	0							
OPEER	151	7	5	9	1	10	3	
	15	1	0	2	0	1	0	
OPHS	59		129					
	8		0					
	4		4					
OPPD	58					51		
	13					13		
<b>TOTAL</b>	854	114	736	196	132	81	129	2242
<b>TOTAL</b>	85	4	52	14	15	16	15	201
<b>% Absent</b>	9.95%	3.51%	7.07%	7.14%	11.36%	19.75%	11.63%	8.97%
<b>TOTAL</b>	5	0	15	1	0	0	0	21
								0.94%

Key:

Total # of Employees
# Absent for any reason
# That Couldn't be Reached